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Robert Vallee, Marguerite Blais, Dorothy Poste and Vlasta Vrana star in the Olympian Follies, at Mother Martin's nightly except Monday.

Shortage of sharpness in 'Olympian Follies'

By TOM SCURFIELD
for The Gazette

Montreal right now is a veritable gold mine of potential material for a sharp satirical revue. The Olympics, crime probes, labor troubles, hints of political chicanery, destruction of old land marks — all are raw ore waiting to be refined into a creation that would let Montrealers laugh at the absurdity of life on this island.

Rick Kardonne, the writer of Olympian Follies which opened Friday night at Mother Martin's, has taken these elements, but instead of 24 carat gold, he has given us a 14 carat creation.

Olympian Follies isn't a bad show — far from it — but it misses greatness on almost all points. It is amusing instead of uproarious. It uses some material, such as a song about an American who swam the Atlantic Ocean, which has no bearing on Montreal and a song about Westmount seceeding which was funny some years ago when the idea was first used.

DROPPED

Potentially funny characters, such as an Arab shiek who wants to move the Olympics to Mecca, are introduced and then dropped after one song. With the exception of a Drapeau-like figure, there isn't any real continuity during the evening.

The production also losses impact by being broken up into three very short acts. Each act runs about 20 minutes with a 15 minute intermission in between. I was told this was due to the policy of Mother Martin's to enable them to sell enough drinks during the evening.

Well, it is a bad policy, because the cast must constantly work to recapture the audience's attention and the show never really hits its stride. The pace suffers and most of the zip and sparkle that is there is lost.

The cast is very good, with top marks going to Marguerite Blais, who is totally delightful. Dorothy Poste and Robert Vallee. Vlasta Vrana doesn't fare as well due to being given several songs not suited to his vocal range.

There is a basic flaw in the writing of this revue. Satirical lines must be heard to be appreciated. All too often in Olympian Follies they are lost due to the style of the music.

The show really works in numbers such as The Olympian Banquet, Dinner Tonight, Man And His World and Montrealer's Lament.

David Calderisi has staged the show well, using every inch of the small stage. The 'Drapeau masks' and the other props are very well done.

All this show needs now is some rewriting and pruning to improve the book. It should run as a one hour show without intermissions, or if it must be broken up, then in two half hour acts.

Theatres show variety, life

Phoenix tops Festival finals

By TOM SCURFIELD
for The Gazette

Soundheim! Phoenix Theatre's musical tribute to Stephen Sondheim, walked off with three out of six adjudicator's awards at the 1975 Quebec Drama Festival Saturday night.

The production won Best Visual and Best Production, while Kathy McGlynn won Best Actress on the strength of her work in the show.

Festival adjudicator Tony Van Bridge gave Heather Stanley, also from Soundheim, an honorable mention in the supporting actress category.

Our Town, presented by The Genesians, was next with two major awards and an honorable mention. Don Tobin won Best Actor for the role of Stage Manager, while Gerry Tynan won Best Supporting Actor for his portrayal of the milkman, Howie Newsome.

FINE WORK

Carol McCormick was given an honorable mention in the best actress category for her very fine work as Emily in Our Town.

Cole & Company took the balance of the awards with Jo-Anne Clark being named Best Supporting Actress and Gayle Garfinkle winning an honorable mention in the best supporting category.

The Screeners Prize, given by the person who screens the shows for entrance to the Festival, was presented to Gary Cosgrove of the North Shore Players. The prize is given to mark an outstanding performance in the plays not chosen to appear in the Festival.

IMPACT

There was no award for Best Director this year as Van Bridge felt that there wasn't any great impact that could be credited to a director in any of the shows. Van Bridge also said that the decisions on awards were difficult due to the variety of shows seen during the week.

This year's QDF was made up of two musical revues, two older dramatic works, an exploration of the Turkish massacre of the Armenians and an evening of selections from Greek drama concerning women.

I can appreciate Tony Van Bridge's concerns with this year's festival as I share them when it comes to writing this review. In many cases it is like mixing apples and onions and trying to produce an even blending. The only way to tackle the problem is to comment on each show separately.

Cole & Company: This production, which earlier had a run at Centaur 1, opened the week. It is a tribute to Cole Porter, the man and his music. Using slides, dialogue, narration, dance and song it tells the story of Porter's life.

The show lacked a real focal point and suffered from a lack of coherent style. The slides were difficult to see and were partially blocked by an uninspired set.

There were one or two real bright spots — Bruce Retallack's telling of the Tale of The Oyster, Kathy McGlynn's superb rendition of Love for Sale and Jo-Anne Clark's Laziest Gal in Town.

The cast worked well together and the chorus work was strong. However, the show didn't provide a strong opening to the festival.

Not In God's Image: Presented by The Labdon Theatre Company, this look at woman through the eyes of Greek playwrights and T.S. Eliot was the low point of the week.

The cast of young women did not have the necessary experience to play Greek drama, one of the most difficult theatre forms to play.

The director, who also arranged the material, was completely out of touch with the style and message of the selections presented. With the exception of the dance drama, the movement was artificial and dated.

One bright spot was the performance of Kim Andrews in a piece from Electra.

This show will be presented on December 12 and 13 at the Revue Theatre and I wouldn't recommend it to any but the curious.

Our Town: The festival came to life on Wednesday night with this good, solid production by The Genesians. This modern classic by Thornton Wilder is a very difficult play, as it depends totally on word pictures. It is presented on a bare stage devoid of scenery.

Van Bridge, in his remarks after the play, stated that he had to be super-critical to find fault with the production. It was well performed with three outstanding portrayals — Stage Manager, the Milkman and Emily.

It lacked pace and the make-up and costumes didn't always help the actors. However, it was a strong production of festival calibre.

Hiatad: The Armenian Case: Presented by the McGill English Department's Drama Programme and directed by Robert Tembeck, this history of the Armenians and one man's search for his identity was well done.

It is a curious production, part polemic, part black comedy, with the use of dance, slides and music. it was well mounted with good visual impact and lighting.

Van Bridge commented that the play couldn't be judged as it was impossible to place it against revues or a play like Our Town.

He went on to state that cast and director had quite rightly got caught up in the emotion of the play, but at times they were so involved they excluded the audience.

The stage movement by Iro Tembeck was extremely good. In fact, Van Bridge stated that the chorus movements were the best points of the play.

Soundheim!: This production was the high point of the festival. The whole show had class, life and visual appeal.

I had seen this show when it opened last month at the Phoenix Theatre in TMR. It has been much-improved since that time.

Costumes, decor, graphics, lighting, all were first rate. The company sang and moved very well, giving the feeling that it was a work of love. There had been one change in the cast, with director Greg Peterson taking over from Robert Vallee who is now appearing in Olympian Follies.

Van Bridge's comments were limited to the use of blackouts between songs and the appearance of the piano.

The Barretts of Wimpole Street: This play of the start of love between Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett hasn't aged well. And the England-Trawick-MacMillan production that closed the festival wasn't well mounted.

The show suffered in every category — set, casting, lighting, direction. It brought back memories of amateur theatre productions seen around Montreal 20 years ago.

Van Bridge commented that it was hard play to produce as it is out of style. It is difficult to get these 'star period' plays back on stage as they need a style of their own and in Van Bridge's opinion, that style was lacking here.

However, he commended the effort and many members of the audience seemed to enjoy the play.

Where does the QDF go now? It is becoming obvious that two festivals are needed — one for musical shows and the other for drama and comedy. A second festival would encourage more groups to submit their plays for screening and add to the number of English plays to be seen.

This week has shown that the threatre is alive and well in Montreal. More exposure will only increase its vitality.

MSO, musicians make music

The Montreal Symphony Orchestra yesterday concluded a new two-year contract with the Musicians' Guild of Montreal, thus putting an end to the conflict which has caused the cancellation of several concerts. Yesterday's agreement will enable the Dec. 9 and 10 Gala Concerts to be presented as planned, under the direction of Zubin Mehta.

The new collective agreement, arrived at by the two parties, was based on the report of mediator Richard Drouin, appointed by Quebec's minister of cultural affairs.

MSO officials stated that they were satisfied with the new agreement. "The musicians can now return to the business of making music," declared John Goodwin, MSO managing director and chief negotiator, "and the orchestra can continue to pursue its objectives."

Italian rock at the Show Mart

PFM effortless, unimpressive

By JUAN RODRIGUEZ
for The Gazette

Italy's leading rock group, Premiata, Forneria, Marconi, has the reputation of putting its classical training to use in its compositions. Classical strains are whipped out in a multi-textured style, creating what the group likes to call the new music of the 20th century.

However, the Show Mart Palais du Commerce — where PFM performed on Friday night — is not exactly La Scala. It is a good locale for custom car shows and closed-circuit boxing matches, but its acoustics — that of a concrete shoebox, in which everything vibrates — ate up PFM's ostensibly complicated sound like so much ravioli.

Luckily, the audience of maybe a thousand was comprised of hardcore PFM fans who would withstand anything to submerge themselves in the group's sound. It was pretty messy and clashy, but the band is so used to churning out this pseudo-classical fare, that they could sound tight if they played blindfolded.

Before becoming rock stars, the five members of PFM played on a large proportion of Italy's native pop records. Also, Mauro Pagani (flute, violin), Flavio Premoli (synthesizer, mellotron, piano), Franco Mussida (guitar), Franz Di Cioccio (drums) and Patrick Djivas (bass) all wear very tight continental pants and sculpted pointy boots.

Their music is programmed rock-classical with some operatic and jazz spice. PFM's distinguishing feature is their ability to play this so effortlessly, so it was ironic to see them move so zippily on stage to sound that was so nightmarishly distorted.

SUBTLETY

Then again, PFM's sound never was much on emotional subtlety, and their audience no doubt got stoned to it.

The opening act was Maelstrom, a Quebecois hippie-cum-folk-rock-jazz ensemble, whose forays are excruciating enough in the best of conditions, let alone the infernal acoustics of the Show Mart.

Jazzmaster Roland Kirk recovering from stroke

By NIGHTHAWK
for The Gazette

Rahsaan Roland Kirk, the multi-instrumentalist wonder of jazz, suffered a stroke and kidney complications about two weeks ago. His condition is now improving.

His right side paralysed and his speech impaired, Rahsaan, 39, spent two days in the intensive care unit of the East Orange General Hospital, N.J., in an alarming state.

Now his paralysis is fading and his general recovery is as amazing as his musical genius.

Rahsaan's spirits are bright.

"I still can't use my right hand, but I'm going into total therapy tomorrow and starting on the exercises," Rahsaan said yesterday, showing his usual determination.

Rahsaan, who has been fully conscious throughout the ordeal, is particularly annoyed at having had to cancel some engagements, including New Year's at the Village Vanguard in New York.

He is now feeling so much better that he's threatening to check himself out of the hospital, if the doctors don't release him soon.

Rahsaan has thousands of fans and friends in Montreal who will know that, to him, this illness is only a new obstacle to master.

When reminded that all of us loved him, "Yeah, I know," he laughed, "me, too!"

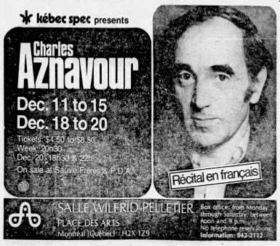
Stallworthy wins award

LONDON — (CP) — Poet and author Jon Stallworthy has won the 1975 W. H. Smith 1,000 Pound literary award for a biography of the First World War poet Wilfred Owen.

Stallworthy, born in 1935, is deputy academic publisher of Oxford University Press and has published six collections of poems.

Blue Red

Iverson Minter, who calls himself Louisiana Red and rates among the better bluesmen, returns to Montreal for two shows tonight at 9.30 and 11.30 at the Cafe Campus, 3315 Queen Mary Rd. Meanwhile, over at the Forum, Frank Zappa and the Mothers will split a bill this evening with Myles & Lenny.



Concerts by Sonny and Brownie

They're still the same and still terrific

By MIKE REGENSTREIF
for The Gazette

Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee were back in Montreal on Friday and Saturday nights to play four concerts at the Cinema Outremont. The veteran folk-blues men have been favorites on Montreal's club and concert scene for longer than most of their fans have been alive.

Both had been around for quite a few years when they pooled their talents in 1939 to form a partnership that has endured 36 years of hard travelling, thousands of gigs and over fifty record albums. In Montreal they've appeared in small coffee houses, Place-des-Arts, and just about everything in between.

Virtuoso

Their show has changed little over the years. They come out onto the stage and launch into a half hour set of Brownie's guitar backing the blind Sonny Terry's whoop 'n' holler singing and virtuoso harmonicas playing.

Let it be noted that Sonny Terry is the man who defined how to play blues harmonica and that there will probably never be anyone to equal his power on the small horn. Vocally he has a primitive whoop 'n' holler style, too, that is basic to the blues that he sings.

In contrast, Brownie McGhee's set is as sophisticated as they come. His guitar playing shows a life time of feeling for his instrument and his singing is as smooth as Sonny's is raw. McGhee is also one of the best songwriters of the idiom as shown by such tunes as Love, Truth and Confidence, Walk On, and Got No Drivin' Wheel.

The best part of the show comes when the duo sings together, a treat they save for the always demanded encore.

When they harmonize on Rock Island Line or Drinkin' Wine Spodee Odee they are irresistable.

Sonny & Brownie . . . after 36 years

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